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THE FORT WORTH AREA TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT TEAM

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THE NEED FOR A TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT TEAM

Mankind's perpetual love affair with the automobile and a dogged determination to avoid public transportation at all costs has created a dilemma that seems to elude solution; that of too many cars and not enough space to drive or park them. Unfortunately, most of the experts agree that this problem is going to get worse in the years ahead.

We may speculate that this problem is unique to the twentieth century. Actually, traffic congestion is not a modern day phenomenon. The first great road builders were the Romans. They built more than 50,000 miles of roads, some of which are still in use today. Their expertise at road building may have helped them conquer and rule an empire that covered 2.5 million square miles by 117 A.D., but it also introduced the cities along the roads to an early form of gridlock. As the empire expanded and cities grew around the new seats of government, the proliferation of carts and chariots provided traffic headaches for the municipal officials of those times. The vehicles traveling into many of these Roman cities became such a problem that they were prohibited from entering the business districts during certain hours of the day. One-Way streets and off-street parking was provided in an attempt to gain relief. It is interesting to note that the concept of traffic islands and rotaries originated with the Romans.

Mankind's problems are seldom solved by ignoring them and hoping that they will go away. Resolution most often results from a willingness of the concerned parties to set aside emotionalism and try to work together to find a solution mutually agreeable to all. It seems logical then that the traffic problems that daily spill over the borders of local governments would be more effectively dealt with through collaboration between the representatives of the various agencies responsible for the construction, operation and law enforcement on the local roads. This can be achieved by establishing and maintaining reliable channels

of communication and by trying to maintain a good working relationship. This approach seems logical, but in practice, is not widely practiced. For some organizations, traditional policies, bureaucratic redtape and strong personalities, make quick decisions and compromise difficult.

When dealing with traffic problems, we must get away from the idea that the congestion belongs exclusively to the County, the City or to the State. We must accept the fact that these are collectively "our" problems and that it is in our mutual best interest to seek joint solutions. We must also realize that the engineers who design and build the roads may inadvertently create problems for those who must enforce the traffic laws. The optimization of operations on our highways will have to come about through an understanding of the different roles played by engineering and enforcement. This understanding must be complemented by the development of mutual respect for the challenges and limitations faced by both groups and the dedication to work together for the common good of the highway users.

The concept of a "Corridor/Traffic Management Team" resulted from an attempt to formally recognize and implement steps toward capitalizing upon this concept of cooperation. The team concept brings together selected delegates from various governmental entities who agree to meet on a regular basis to share ideas and seek ways to improve traffic conditions. This system works best when the team members have the authority to commit their organizations to agreed-upon courses of action.

BACKGROUND AND COMPOSITION OF THE FORT WORTH AREA TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT TEAM (TMT)

The first meeting of the Fort Worth Team was held on Wednesday, September 12, 1979 with six members in attendance. The founding intent of the team formation was "to work toward the optimum movement of people and goods within freeway corridors so as to obtain the high degree of mobility needed to improve the well being of people and to maintain and increase the economy of the cities" - (Bob Hodge 1979). An additional goal was "to develop Traffic Management Systems (surveillance, traffic control, motorist aid and information systems) to improve the movement of all vehicles within a corridor." It was additionally stated "that since the agencies attending the TMT meetings had the responsibility for various activities that affect the overall operation of these corridors, that a joint cooperative effort toward optimization of resources was a worth while endeavor."

Each member was selected for their ability to make binding decisions for the agency that they represent. It was urged that while guests are welcome, that if possible, the member should personally attend the meetings. It was felt that

regular delegation of meeting attendance would result in a rapid deterioration of the team structure and authority.

The Fort Worth Area Team Membership Includes:

From Tarrant County:
County Engineer

From the City of Fort Worth:
City Engineer of Transportation
Deputy Police Chief - Uniform Services
Police Captain - Traffic
Police Lieutenant - Traffic
Transportation Authority (Bus Company)

From the City of Arlington:
Director of Transportation
Deputy Police Chief
Police Lieutenant - Traffic

From the State Government:
SDHPT - District Design Engineer
SDHPT - District Maintenance Engineer
SDHPT - District Traffic Engineer
SDHPT - District Safety Coordinator
DPS - Lieutenant

Various other auxiliary members attend on a regular basis. The average attendance is fifteen people. The meeting is scheduled from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month at the SDHPT District Headquarters.

HOW THE MEETINGS ARE ORGANIZED AND CONDUCTED

The monthly program organization and administrative support for the team is provided by the team chairman. The team chairman in Fort Worth is the SDHPT's District Traffic Engineer. This may have evolved more from an availability of resources than for any other reason. There does not appear to be much sentiment for rotating the chairmanship among the members.

In order for a team to solve problems, the problems must be recognized and put on the Agenda. Traffic situations of a "crisis" nature are usually solved by the field personnel of the agencies at the time of occurrence, leaving the team members with less pressing issues to deal with. We try to select discussion topics that will be of general interest to as many members as possible. However, this is not always possible with a group with such diverse backgrounds and areas of responsibility. Most of the members are working daily in the area of traffic engineering or enforcement. However, the membership also includes county and transportation company officials who are directly impacted by traffic problems, but not directly involved with its control. It is also interesting to note that the Fort Worth Area Team has members from two large cities.

This requires that the agenda be structured to address issues of interest to both Fort Worth and Arlington. This is really not as difficult as it may sound because the cities do have similar problems and share common boundaries at several locations.

A regular monthly meeting schedule is desirable. A meeting with a sparse agenda is preferable to cancelling due to a lack of items to discuss. It is interesting to note that the unexpected discussion topics that come up in meetings with light agendas have often proven to be the most interesting. A "long-range agenda planning log" allows for the preplanning of some topics, and provides the opportunity to plan "fillers" for slow meetings. In the past we have modified our agenda scheduling to allow time for a short organizational brief by the members. They are asked to prepare a short overview of their organization and their specific area of responsibility. These short presentations provide the opportunity to improve our mutual understanding of how the various elements of the agencies are structured and consequently how we can communicate more efficiently. It also allows the differing personalities of the members to emerge.

Selection of the agenda items is very important. A steady diet of traffic control plan reviews is boring at best, although necessary occasionally. We try to poll the members before each meeting and encourage them to suggest topics for discussion. Priority is given to issues of a serious nature and of immediate interest. The team members are encouraged to contact each other at any time if an urgent operational problem comes up. This "informal" line of communication is one of the distinct advantages of an organization such as this. We try not to put too many items on the Agenda; because we want to leave adequate time for open discussion. It seems that a small group of the members bring up the majority of the issues for discussion. This is probably a natural outgrowth of the extent of their daily involvement with the traffic situations.

The original concept of the team's intended purpose may have been to deal with congestion problems within a specific corridor and to assist in the concept of design for Traffic Management Systems. However, at different points in time, the emphasis of the group's efforts have shifted. This occasional redirection of the Team's interests and focal points is, I believe, a natural outgrowth of the transition in team personalities. Also, changes in the challenges associated with dealing within the local driving environment, such as extensive ongoing construction activities, redirects the discussion points.

Some problems never seem to get solved. Research of the notes from past meetings disclosed that different generations of team members have struggled with the same problems over and over.

CONDUCTING THE MEETING

To reinforce the theme of co-operative spirit and equal status of all members, we made up stationery that has a decorative heading that features the official logo of all the agencies represented on the team. We also arrange the tables in a square or circle to down-play the role of the chairman and try to avoid the "Corporate Board Room" look.

The chairman should introduce the topics and moderate the transitions, but he should not try to dominate the meeting; rather he should back-off and let the participants interact freely. He should direct the sequencing of discussion topics and try to insure that each member has an opportunity to present their side of the issue. An attempt should be made to "draw out" opinions from less vocal team members. In the event of disagreements among the members, he should not take sides, but should be an impartial moderator. However, he should intervene if the discussion tends to get out of hand and tempers flare.

We prefer to avoid assigned seating. We make up table name plates for each member and guest, but we place them on a table near the door so that the members can pick them up and sit where they feel the most comfortable. We discourage interruptions from telephone calls or other messages.

Guests, such as the SDHPT Resident Engineers, should be encouraged to attend the meetings to discuss items that involve ongoing construction. They should not be "brow-beaten" or placed in the position of having to defend the project activities. Involving them in the problem discussion serves to introduce them to the purpose and advantages of the team concept, affords the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the problems in the field and often allows for immediate solutions to construction-related problems. If we have guest speakers, such as the Resident Engineers, we try to sequence the speakers so that they may leave early if they need to.

Commitments made in the meeting should be honored if at all possible. Try and review any solutions that have been implemented since the last meeting. Some items, such as support for special events, may be delegated to subcommittees for detailed planning.

The organization presenting a particular issue should do their homework in advance. We try to provide maps, diagrams and through research on a problem or issue that we know will be discussed at a meeting. Some members choose to use video tape or color slides to provide a good description of the the problem.

SUMMARY

The traffic management team is not a magic "cure all" for all of the traffic ills that plague our cities. It is a very powerful tool for solving problems that require a close degree of inter-governmental cooperation and it does often reduce the reaction time for obtaining relief from specific problems. It can also improve the handling of special events through shared resources and joint advance planning.

Operational improvements are a welcome benefit. However, another important advantage of the Traffic Management Team concept is the opportunity to regularly communicate on an informal basis with local engineering and enforcement professionals involved with traffic design and control. Anyone who has tried to fight their way through the bureaucratic maze that exists in many large agencies can well appreciate the advantage of being able to deal directly with the person who has the "power of decision". An old adage "united we stand, divided we fall" may have originally been directed toward a wartime situation, but is very applicable to the daily battle that our engineers and police face with traffic congestion on the highways.

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